CEYLON

MRS. WILLIAM DENT

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CEYLON

A DESCRIPTIVE POEM, WITH NOTES

BY

MRS. WILLIAM DENT

NÉE CAMPBELL

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DEDICATED TO

THE SINGHALESE PEOPLE,

IN MEMORY OF THE

HAPPIEST YEARS OF HER LIFE PASSED IN

THEIR LOVELY ISLAND.

CEYLON.

I.

HAIL! land of loveliness, and beauty rare,
Matchless thy gifts, as though the fairies kind
Beholding thee, and deeming thee so fair,
With wond'ring homage, each around thee twined
Some precious gift, from earth and air, and sea;
For such, O lovely one, have been bestowed on thee!

II.

Within the Ocean's womb long hadst thou lain,
Maturing there, perchance some thousand years
Or more. At last, upheaved 'midst throes and pain,
An isle of beauty on his breast he wears,
An Orient pearl, set in a sapphire sea!
England her fairest gem beholds in thee!

III.

Thy parent Ocean places at thy feet
Corals and pearls, that strew his gorgeous floor ;
Dolphins, and flying fish, and mermaids fleet
Sport 'mid the seaweeds, while from Conch shells pour
The music of the waves, that lulled thy sleep,
Till the "Word" hurled thee from the amorous deep.

IV.

When bursts upon the world the roseate morn,
Flinging aside the portals of the East,
Not ling'ringly, but ush'ring in the Dawn
With golden splendours rapidly, to feast
Upon earth's loveliness and rend aside
Night's jewelled curtain which those charms would hide :

V.

Thus, o'er Ceylon is marshalled in the morn
As glorious ; the sun embraces earth,
The air, the sea ; the very depths are torn
From night's chill kiss, to sing in joyous mirth
Of the great miracle, the daily birth !

VI.

Here, the proud ocean basks beneath his rays,
As pearl-entangled fringe the golden sands
Caress with murmurs soft, while fitful plays
The diamond spray, whose jewelled and glitt'ring bands
Encircle thee, Queen of the Indian Sea.
Ceylon ! what land can e'er compare with thee ?

VII.

But when the night returns to claim her own,
The sun, all ling'ringly, seeks the far West,
Spreading such varied charms of hue and tone,
In fond farewell,—reluctant sinks to rest,
Building upon the Ether's trembling zone,
Seas, rivers, lakes, fair islands of the blest;—
For such I deemed them, gazing on the sky,
All rainbow-tinted, rich with imagery.

VIII.

That well might lead one to believe above
Are worlds more beautiful than even this—
Myriads, perchance, where happiness and love
Reign unalloyed—abodes of endless bliss. . . .
The sun to earth, reluctant, bids farewell,
Yielding to night's caressing shadowy spell.

IX.

In dreamy moontide, slumb'ring 'mid the waves,
Soft undulating, rocking thee to rest,
Pale amorous sea-nymphs, gliding from their caves,
Float 'mid the stars, mirrored on ocean's breast,
Like liquid gems upon the waters gleaming—
Forget-me-nots of angels, surely seeming,
Wherein the Nereids, circling, dance and play.
At Dawn's approach the vision fades away.

X.

When slumb'ring Moon withdraws her silv'ry light,
With phosphorescent life the waters teem,
All luminous the sea on darkest night,
As though imprisoned stars did upwards gleam,
Whilst fragile nautilus in fairy boat
'Mid pearly sea-foam gently gliding float.

XI.

Fishes, most brilliant, all of varied hue,
Amid the waves, like water rainbows dart.
Upheavèd shells the golden sands bestrew.
Ah! who can vie in beauty Nature's art—
God's own creation, formed by love divine,
When o'er Ceylon He smiled, thou land sublime!

XII.

Within thy forests flash like wingèd flame
The birds of Paradise, disdaining earth!
And perfumed air plants, intertwining frame
A setting rich, and fair, of aërial birth
Wherein the fire-flies dance in wanton play,
And graceful stag-like mantes seem to pray.

XIII.

The tiny humming-bird, like jewelled flower
Of rainbow tints, flutters the leaves among
In honey-quest, but oft with angry power
And mimic rage the blossoms scatter—flung
In disappointment that the search was vain,—
Then onward flies, in honey-quest again.

XIV.

'Mid forest depths, all trees most rare abound—
Satin wood, ebony, and sandal sweet;
The banyan grand, whose arches spread around,
Affording shade, and rest to weary feet;
The calamander, too, of silky sheen,
So prized, that precious gems were set between;

XV.

Palmyra, talipot, and tubed bamboo,
Yellow and green their varied leaves unfurled.
The timid tortoise, creeping through the dew,
At slightest sound its head in shell is curled,
Yet on its back an elephant could stand,
A world supporting,—emblem of the land.

XVI.

Nutmegs and cinnamon, rich spices, too,
Fill the warm air with heavy fragrant breath ;
The tea and coffee shrubs, of snowy hue,
Their flowerets pale, enclosed in glossy sheath ;
And the proud bô-tree, with its blossoms lush,
As though with crimsoned sunset's stolen flush.

XVII.

Beneath the shade of one of countless years,
Within the temple court of ruined shrine,
The sacred Bô-tree still its crest uprears.
'Tis said, Prince Siddaratha did recline,
And there attained of Buddhahood the birth,
Eternal rest and peace, beyond this earth!

XVIII.

Pilgrims devout still worship at this shrine,
And thousands yearly to that tree repair,
Treasuring the leaves as precious and divine,
Assured some healing power still lingers there.
God's words, upspeaking through the dark cold earth,
In flowers, and shrubs, and trees, to which the Word gave birth.

XIX.

In yonder temple, hid in costly shrine,
Rests Buddha's tooth—whose worshippers sincere,
Prostrate adore, yet see not! The Divine,
All creeds admit, and deem He will appear,
Not veiled, but in His awful majesty,
Uplift His own towards His infinity.

XX.

Those who in simple faith and hope await
That glorious time, when man, from sin unbound,
And freed from all the cares our fallen state
From purity to sin did then surround,—
Those who thus wait, in patience, these shall see
That time when universal love alone shall be
The bond to knit all hearts in blessèd unity.

XXI.

There is a love which casteth out all fear;
Thousands there may be, through fanatic creed
All truth perverting, these would fain uprear,
As we in Europe see, for Satan's greed,
A standard false, and blighting poisons sow,
Turning the gracious streams that from God's mercies flow,
All that He said was good, to endless woe.

XXII.

Flame of the forest whose bright blossoms flush
With gold, and crimson hues—Flamboyant named
Appropriately, for where thy brilliant blush
Illumes the jungle depths, like torch aflamed,
The pilgrim, travelling to some shrine to pray,
Cheered and delighted, onwards wends his way.

XXIII.

The scented grasses, sweet, and healing too,
Perfume thy verdant plains, full many a mile,
And flowers that open to the evening dew,
Telling of time correct, a floral dial,
Obedient to a law supreme, above
Our finite sense, but speaking of His love.

XXIV.

The lofty cocoanuts, the palm-trees grand,
Thy shores befringe with food and milk, a store
Hospitable, profuse, thou bounteous land!
Reviewing thee, the soul must e'en adore
The Word, the God, Creator,—He whose name
In creeds may vary, worship is the same.

XXV.

The stately elephant, so gently seeming,
Through the vast jungle roves with wary tread,
His tusks of ivory white, upcurvèd gleaming,
As feeding from the branches overhead;
Cobra and python twine the trees among,
Bird, insect, reptile, beast, a wondrous throng!

XXVI.

Parrots and monkeys, chattering and screaming,
Climb 'mid the trees, ever a busy throng,
Startling the love-birds from their noon-day's dreaming,
As, nestling breast to breast, with whispered song,
Murm'ring of love devoted, constant ever,
Not even death these little birds can sever.

XXVII.

But singing birds are rare, for it is said
That, at the Fall, when man first sinned and died,
The sorrowing birds affrighted, drooping fled,
Nor sang again at morn or eventide,
Dismayed at Paradise, thus sin defiled.

XXVIII.

Ere then, the peacock's note in beauty vied
His gorgeous plumage, green and sapphire blue,
With cinnamon and topaz tints beside,
As though from earth and heaven they stole their hue.
But when the blight fell, dooming man to die,
Jehovah's song-bird uttered a shrill cry,
Nor sang again the heaven-born melody.

XXIX.

King of the river, Maha Rajah Oya!
Art unforgotten thou, O plant most rare,
Hid amid swampy jungles, hard to follow
As ever tiger crouching in his lair?
Thy velvet leaves of richest, darkest green,
Almost to black, they scarcely could be seen,
But for their glitt'ring edge of golden sheen.

XXX.

On oleander trees, whose roseate flower
Contrasts in beauty with the dark green leaf,
Hang golden balls, wherein await the hour
To burst unprisoned from their glistening sheath
Young butterflies of brown and sober hue,
Whose bonds were brilliant, liberty more true.

XXXI.

The moon-flower's heavy scent of sweet vanille
Floats on the night wind, tremulous with love,
As through her silv'ry leaves the moonbeams steal
Unheedingly of myriad worlds above,
For Dian's kiss alone she bares her breast,
All perfumed, pure, and pale, awaits the royal guest.

XXXII.

There, in some pathway, circling columns roll
Of gorgeous butterflies, kaleidoscopic;
Mingling, co-mingling, varied as the scroll
In hue and form, as gems set microscopic
In rich mosaic, shimmering at each motion,
These travellers circle, restless as the ocean.

XXXIII.

The glowworm, in this land of wondrous things,
Unlike our own, is large, and scaly seems,
E'en as the hop flower, but the light it flings
Lures many a night bird, hurrying at its gleams,
Warned by that emerald ray of trysting hour,
When to his mate he murmurs love's sweet power.

XXXIV.

The leaf-insect, e'en as a leaf that crawls,
For life and movement blend in plant instinct,—
The lizards green and red, on ruined walls
Of ancient palaces, cities extinct,—
Within thy jungled depths embosomed lie,
Thou land of beauty, love, and mystery!

XXXV.

The green and golden pines, of fruit the crowned
Oranges, mangoes, luscious mangosteen,
Guavas, forbidden-fruit, all these abound;
Lichees, sour-sop of flavour opaline,—
So many blend, entice, as in that stone
Whose hue combines all other tints in one.

XXXVI.

On placid lakes the water-lilies float,
Rose-tinted some, others sweet pearl-buds pale,
Resting upon an emerald leafy boat,
Unheedingly of tropic storm or gale;
When, suddenly, by am'rous power unseen,
Drawn down and down, beneath the waters sheen,
Again uprise full-blown—a lotus queen!

XXXVII.

The flower of cocoanut, in ivory sheath,
Crowns the tall palms with queen-like beauty fair ;
Lilies, both white and pink, with fragrant breath,
In shadowy loveliness reflected are,
Drooping to water's edge, all languidly
Kissing the wavelets with a perfumed sigh.

XXXVIII.

Mountains and valleys, rivers, lakes, combine
With vegetation wild, luxuriant here.
Landscape on landscape seem to intertwine
Meeting uprising peaks, that float mid-air
Thousands of feet above the rippling sea,
As striving heaven to reach, in hushed solemnity.

XXXIX.

Beneath thy breast, spice-laden, lie enwombed
In mines unfathomed many a precious gem—
Star-stones and sapphires, cat's-eyes, all entombed;
Emeralds and rubies, fit for diadem
Of monarch proud, yet guarded from man's spoil
By foul miasma, deadly, from the soil

XL.

Which, griffin-like, as it was said of yore,
Defends, protecting from man's conquering lust,
These precious things, the gold and silver ore,
Moonstones, and zircons, scattered here as dust,
Yet priceless! Who hath courage, let him dare
The fever fiend, and from his clutches tear
Earth's brightest richest gems enshrined here.

XLI.

Yet kindly dews revive, refresh the earth ;
The fallen leaves enrich luxuriant plains,
Where potent herbs and plants of healing worth
Abound,—true antidotes, to heal the pains
To which, alas ! humanity is prone ;
But to assuage, God's mercy thus is shown !
Thou earthly Paradise, where ling'reth ever
These gifts of Love Divine, to leave thee never !

XLII.

But of the people of this wondrous land,
How shall my memory full justice do ?
It needs more skill than love can e'en command,
Their gentle loyalty, affection true
In verse to render. But, one loved them well
Who knew them best. My father used to tell
To me, his child, how good these people were,
Grateful, and faithful, proud of England's care !

XLIII.

They love their Empress, on her justice lean,
Assured no tyranny can ever dwell
Beneath her regal sway, and smiles that beam
O'er countless subjects, who, devoted, tell
" In *deeds*, not *words* " alone, that for their Queen
The last drop of their blood would shed, I ween.

XLIV.

Flattery is hushed when Ceylon is the theme,
As mem'ry on mem'ries throng, her charms to tell!
Are there not witcheries that through beauty beam
Unspeakable? yet, weaving such a spell
That limner, language, never can pourtray,
Though haunted by their magic power alway.

XLV.

Thou "Eden of the eastern wave," farewell!
All poets thy praise have sung, one tribute more,
Albeit a humble one, my verse would swell
In contribution. The accumulated store
Of all combined would unexhausted leave
The theme, thy charms, for future poets to weave.

XLVI.

Farewell! oh word of anguish, and of sorrow,
When breathed by those we much and fondly love!—
Oft calmly said by riven hearts that borrow
This veil to hide the grief their bosoms prove.
For with that word, throng memories of the past,
Of happy hours we deemed could last for ever,
Ties of affection, joys too bright to last,—
All these, and more, that little word can sever!

XLVII.

Those who have known thee never can forget
The matchless beauties Heaven upon thee showered.
Those who have loved thee, ever must regret
When the sad hour of parting from thee lowered,
But how can verse of mine full justice do
To thee, Ceylon? for howsoever true,

XLVIII.

'Tis truth in part, a fragment from the whole.
God's great creation, how can man unroll
And name each wonder that His mighty hand,
Lavished on thee, Serindib! glorious land!
Farewell, farewell to thee, thou beauteous one,
Where light first dawned, fit birthplace of the sun!
For so 'tis said, that on this lovely isle
First dawned the light! and then, a woman's smile—
Fair Eve's, on Adam!

NOTES.

Verse XI.—*Fish of various Hues.*

The fish in Ceylon are of the most beautiful hues—red, blue, pink, yellow, green. Even the crabs are bright red, and yellow, *unboiled.*

Verse XII.—*Birds of Paradise.*

Travelling on horseback soon after sunrise, with my father, on ascending a steep jungle path, we disturbed two of these beautiful birds, who flew out of a lofty tree, the base of which was far down in the precipice below us. The birds flashed like winged flame before us, and were soon lost to sight.

Praying Mantes.

These graceful creatures of the grasshopper species, with tiny stag-like heads and slender bodies, lift up their fore-feet, gently balancing, and clasping them together, as though in prayer.

Verse XIII.—*Humming-Birds.*

I have often seen these little creatures suddenly tear the leaves from the flowers, in violent fury at finding the honey already purloined, of which they were in quest.

Verse XIV.—*Calamander Wood.*

This wood was at one time so prized by the Chinese, that they used to inlay it with precious stones.

Verse XVI.—*Tea.*

The culture of the "tea" plant was first introduced into Ceylon in 1842, the year after Sir Colin Campbell assumed the government of that island. But, owing to the then great difficulty of obtaining skilled and experienced workers from China, it did not succeed; moreover, the cultivation of coffee was then at its zenith. Now, tea has superseded that of coffee, which latter has been destroyed by the ravages of the Coffee Bug (or, Hemileia Vastatrix).

Verse XVII.—*The Sacred Bô-tree.*

The sacred Bô-tree, at Anuradhapura, is the oldest authenticated tree in the world, being 2200 years old.

Verse XXIII.—*Scented Grasses.*

Citronelle and lemon-grass are used as a febrifuge. Horses and cattle, suffering from busotic sores, are healed when sent to feed on these grasses, and soon recover. The oils extracted from them are also invaluable as an embrocation for the relief of rheumatic pains.

Verse XXVI.—*Love-Birds.*

The love-bird soon dies of grief at the loss of its mate. I have tried placing another companion to console the bereaved one, in vain; it mourned to death, and would not be comforted.

Verse XXX.—*Golden Balls.*

My husband brought me a branch of the pink oleander, on the green leaves of which hung, not gold-coloured, but golden balls. He bid me shut them up in a Caltura basket, which I did. When I again looked at them, the gold balls, which had been like fine jeweller's work, were black and shrivelled, but, clinging to the sides of the basket, I discovered three beautiful brown butterflies.

Verse XXXII.—*Travelling Butterflies.*

On several occasions, when travelling on horseback, we have had to halt, not to break through these circling columns of butterflies, migrating from one part of the island to another, moving in cylindrical gyrations, following some instinct even as bees swarming heedless of all else but the mysterious power that guided them.

Verse XXXIV.—*Leaf-Insect.*

Wrapped up in a bit of paper, one day my husband brought me what appeared to be a few dead leaves: some were speckled as with a blight, others as though caterpillar nibbled. I laughingly asked him, "What are these for?" "Wait a bit, dear, and watch them," he replied, as he placed them on a table before me. To my intense surprise the seemingly dead leaves crawled along the table, their tiny feet hardly visible, a wonderful link between plant and insect life, Darwin's theory of evolution exemplified. But this is not all—only a hint, as it were—a drop of water in the ocean of undiscovered mysteries.

Verse XXXVI.—*Water-lilies.*

Often have I stood by lake and riverside, watching the water-lily buds drawn under the water, when, after a slight detonating sound, the flower has uprisen to the surface, a bud no longer.

Verse XXXVIII.—*Peaks amid Air.*

These peaks, rising one above another, seem to float mid-air, as the clouds conceal and envelop their base.

Verse XXXXI.—*Miasma.*

Of gangs of coolies employed in digging for precious stones in the "Saffragam District." In spite of quinine and other comforts supplied for them by their employers, they suffer severely from fever, etc., and are often decimated thereby, ere the gang returns from the expedition.

Verse XLII.

The year following Sir Colin Campbell's death, which occurred barely a fortnight after his return to England from Ceylon, his daughter, then Mrs. George Maclean, revisited Ceylon, and was waited on by a deputation, of which Mr. de Soysa was the chief, expressing the condolence of the Singhalese people at this sad event. To this address these touching words were added, "The Singhalese do not say Sir Colin Campbell is dead, but that the Father of the Singhalese is dead." These words have ever remained as a sacred memory to her, of those by whom he was so beloved.

Verse XLV.—"*Eden of the Eastern Wave.*"

I am indebted to Mr. H. C. de Soysa's letter for this lovely simile.

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Dent, (Mrs.) William
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